

## **Our Catholic Identity and Mission**

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### **Introduction**

My parents sent all 11 of their children to Catholic Schools because they believed a strong Catholic education was essential, not only for success in this world, but more importantly in the life to come. They believed that a Catholic education would best equip their children with the tools they needed to cooperate with God's grace and become saints and so they made extreme sacrifices to ensure that all of their children could have the finest Catholic education money could buy. As I grow older I am beginning to recognize the sacrifices my parents made, spending nearly \$175,000 for each of their 11 children to attend the finest Catholic schools from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Recognizing the great sacrifices my parents made for their children, spending nearly \$2,000,000 on elementary and high school, has caused me to ask if spending all that money was worth it, after all my dad is living proof that you can get an excellent education from the public school system. My dad holds both a PhD and an MD and the first time he went to a private school was for his PhD at Purdue and the first Catholic School he attended was for his MD at St. Louis University.

While one can receive a great education for free in the public school system, my parents made great sacrifices to spend millions of dollars on Catholic education for one primary reason: they wanted their children to be in schools where they could absorb not only knowledge, but also receive strong character formation and most essentially they could breathe in a Catholic ethos.

There is one thing that separates Catholic Schools from any other school; they are unabashedly Catholic! In other words the heart of a Catholic school can be summarized by adapting a wise saying to read "be it known to all who enter our school that Christ is the reason

for this school. He is the unseen but ever present Teacher. He is the model of its faculty and the inspiration of its students.”<sup>1</sup>

A Catholic School is much more than just a school that celebrates Mass every week, hangs crucifixes in the classrooms, says prayers throughout the day and offers religion classes. These Catholic elements do not make a school Catholic; rather a school has these elements because she is Catholic. When a Catholic School is reduced to just doing Catholic things, it ceases to be authentically Catholic, doing great harm to students, because it demonstrates a false sense of Catholicism.

A school is Catholic not because of any particular thing it does, but because it has an authentically Catholic ethos. A school is Catholic because the sum total of our assumptions, beliefs, and values as Catholics are expressed through what is done, how it is done and who is doing it. The Catholic Church, parents and students rightly have an expectation that a Catholic School is truly Catholic. This expectation can be summarized in 5 core principles.

1. Inspired by a Supernatural Vision,
2. Founded on a Christian Anthropology,
3. Animated by Communion and Community,
4. Imbued with a Catholic Worldview throughout its Curriculum and,
5. Sustained by Gospel Witness.<sup>2</sup>

### **Inspired by a Supernatural Vision**

A Catholic school can never forget that her entire community is a community of pilgrims on a journey through this passing life towards eternal life. This supernatural vision, the goal of heaven, must be in the forefront of everything she does. Thus “first and foremost every Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Famous saying attributed to an unknown author.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from James Edward Miller, *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools*. (Bedford: Sophia Institute Press,) 2006. Pg 17.

educational institution is a place to encounter the living God, who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth.”<sup>3</sup> The Catholic School is a privileged place of encounter, where students encounter the life changing and transforming love of God.

The purpose of a Catholic education is to form students to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind and to love their neighbor as their self.<sup>4</sup> Her purpose is to form saints for success in this world and in the next; to form solid citizens of this world who will be citizens in heaven. Together with their parents, a Catholic School shares the moral responsibility of providing an atmosphere where each student is challenged and nurtured to grow in the Catholic faith as they acquire the academic, social and emotional skills needed to fulfill their eternal destiny.

A Catholic School recognizes that God made us to know, love, and to serve Him in this life and to be happy with Him forever in the life to come.<sup>5</sup> He created each human person with unique skills and talents and has called them to a specific vocation in which to use those gifts and talents to give glory to God and to build up His Kingdom here on earth. A Catholic School shares in the sacred work of helping each student hone their God-given gifts and talents to use in service to Christ and His Church.

When this supernatural vision is lost, education is reduced to simply conveying information from one mind to another. Without keeping in mind that the Catholic School educates young men and women called to be saints, the work of education is reduced to simply a means of transmitting information that will improve the student’s chances of worldly success. This pragmatic approach to education not only deprives students of a holistic education, it does

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Catholic Educators*. April 17, 2008. Accessible at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080417\\_cath-univ-washington.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_cath-univ-washington.html)

<sup>4</sup> Mt 22:37 - 39

<sup>5</sup> Baltimore Catechism #1 Q. 6. Accessible at <https://www.google.com/search?q=baltimore+catechism+who+is+the+human+person&oq=baltimore+catechism&qs=chrome.0.69i59j69i57j0l4.2370j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

them a grave disservice because it teaches them that they were made only for this world and fails to instill in them the truth that we were not made for this world, because God has called us out of this world to Himself.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than simply transmitting facts or training students for worldly success a “Catholic education aims not only to communicate facts but also to transmit a coherent, comprehensive vision of life, in the conviction that the truths contained in that vision liberate students in the most profound meaning of human freedom.”<sup>7</sup> “Taking proper account of the stages of human development, the freedom of individuals, and the rights of parents in the education of their children, Catholic Schools must help students to deepen their personal relationship with God and to discover that all things human have their deepest meaning in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> A Catholic school must avoid the temptation to be pragmatic and seek to be spiritual. She must seek to convey the truth rooted in Jesus Christ and not simply the facts in a textbook.

Living in a pragmatic society “the greatest contribution that authentically Catholic education can make to American culture, is to restore to that culture the conviction that human beings can grasp the truth of things, and in grasping that truth can know their duties to God, to themselves and to their neighbors.”<sup>9</sup> A Catholic School must aim to instill in her students the belief that there

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<sup>6</sup> Jn. 15:19

<sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Regions of Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee (U.S.A.) on their “Ad Limina Visit.* May 30, 1998. Par 3. Accessible at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19980530\\_ad-limina-usa-vi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980530_ad-limina-usa-vi.html)

<sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Regions of Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee (U.S.A.) on their “Ad Limina Visit.* May 30, 1998. Par 4. Accessible at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19980530\\_ad-limina-usa-vi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980530_ad-limina-usa-vi.html)

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Regions of Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee (U.S.A.) on their “Ad Limina Visit.* May 30, 1998. Par 4. Accessible at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19980530\\_ad-limina-usa-vi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980530_ad-limina-usa-vi.html)

is a truth, which is rooted in Jesus Christ; a truth that can not only help them to succeed in this life, but also in the life to come.

### **Founded on a Christian Anthropology**

To fulfill her mission, a Catholic School, must set “out to be a school for the human person and of human persons.”<sup>10</sup> Since the primary purpose of a Catholic School is form the whole human person, each Catholic School must be firmly rooted in a proper understanding of who the human person is and the dignity that must be afforded to each human person as a child of God. When one comes to a proper understanding of Christian Anthropology, one comes to see that education is a sacred work which leads both the students and the teachers towards sanctity.

The work of Catholic education is a sacred work. The Catholic faith professes that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. He is the fullness of humanity revealing the fullness of divinity. If someone wants to me more holy, that is to say more like God, then they must strive to be as authentically human as possible because anything that helps them to become more perfect as a human being makes them more like God, who in the person of Jesus Christ is both perfectly human and perfectly divine. In teaching not only theology, but math, history, the sciences, fine arts, athletics, extracurricular activities, etc. teachers help students become more perfectly human, more who God calls each student to be, and thus helps the student grow in holiness.

The Gospels show that Jesus lived His life to give it away. In fact, while every other human person comes into this world to live, Jesus was the one human person who came into this world to die. The witness of Jesus teaches that to be fully human requires one to hand over their life by serving others. After all “whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses

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<sup>10</sup>Cardinal Pio Laghi, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. Congregation for Catholic Education. 12/28/1997. Par 9. Accessible at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_27041998\\_school2000\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html)

his life for my sake will find it.”<sup>11</sup> In the sacred work of education, the teacher helps the student to become more human, thus leading that student to greater holiness. At the same time in giving one receives more than they give, and so the teacher also is lead to greater holiness through allowing their students to make them more authentically human while living out their vocation to teach.

A Catholic School must become, as the term *alma mater* suggests, another mother to her students. She must be a good and caring mother who forms and educates her students to leave the walls of their school and go back into the world as persons of conviction, persons filled with the Joy of the Gospel. She must form them to be Eucharistic people who want to use their God given talents to build up His kingdom.

With this understanding of the human person, it becomes clear that the formation of the whole human person, must include the development of all the student’s human faculties, along with preparation for professional life, formation of ethical and social awareness, leading them to an awareness of the transcendental. “Education must pay regard to the formation of the whole person, so that all may attain their eternal destiny and at the same time promote the common good of society. Children and young persons are therefore to be cared for in such a way that their physical, moral and intellectual talents may develop in a harmonious manner, so that they may attain a greater sense of responsibility and a right use of freedom, and be formed to take an active part in social life.”<sup>12</sup> A Catholic school cannot be reduced simply to the level of learning various skills which are designed to help students succeed at the next level, nor can it be reduced to providing what the consumers (parents) in a competitive market desire. Rather a Catholic School must be the place where the seeds of God’s love and God’s way of living are sewn.

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<sup>11</sup> Mt 16:25

<sup>12</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, c. 795, in *Code of Canon Law: Latin English Edition* (Washington D.C. : Canon Law Society of America, 1983), 299.

## **Animated by Communion and Community**

The Church, the Body of Christ, is a community of persons rooted in the person of Jesus Christ. As an institution of the Church, each Catholic School is a unique community and the communal aspect must be a foundational part of every Catholic School's identity which focuses its entire mission. A Catholic School must be a community who strives to reproduce in its own way, the intimate community of family life. She must be rooted in a common spirit of trust and with the common purpose of forming future saints.

The primary responsibility for setting the communal tone of a school rests with the teachers, both as individuals and as a communal faculty. They set the tone through their interactions with each person that walks through the doors of the school. Just as a parent knows each of their children on a very personal level, so too, teachers should seek to get to know their own students on a personal level.

While respecting individual's roles, the community dimension must be fostered, through open collaboration between administrators, faculty, parents and students. Since parents are the first teachers of their children, the school must see its job as aiding the parents in their sacred obligation to educate their children and not as a substitute for the parents. "There must be the closest cooperation between parents and the teachers to whom they entrust their children to be educated. In fulfilling their task, teachers are to collaborate closely with the parents and willingly listen to them."<sup>13</sup>

During childhood and adolescence a student needs to experience personal relationships with outstanding educators. "The importance of what is taught has great influence on the student's formation when it is placed in the context of a personal involvement, genuine

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<sup>13</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, c. 796, sec. 2 in *Code of Canon Law: Latin English Edition* (Washington D.C. : Canon Law Society of America, 1983), 299.

reciprocity, coherence to attitudes, lifestyles and day to day behavior.”<sup>14</sup> The person relationship between the teacher and the students, therefore, assumes an enormous importance and are not limited simply to giving and taking. While teachers make great sacrifices to educate their students, so often in giving one receives more in return. While the teacher may be the master, a Catholic School teacher recalls that “unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>15</sup> A proper spirit of community recognizes that students and teachers learn from each other.

Each member of the school community is unique and has been created with different gifts and talents. When those talents are used to build up the community, students and faculty are able to truly realize their potential. This communal spirit leads to an ethos that truly represents the community of the Catholic Church.

### **Imbued with a Catholic Worldview Throughout its Curriculum**

The purpose of all academic study is to come to knowledge of the truth. A Catholic School recognizes that the purpose her curriculum is to lead her students to an encounter with Jesus Christ who Himself is the “the way, the truth and the life.”<sup>16</sup> So when academic study is properly undertaken it is truly a spiritual exercise.

Sadly, often in Catholic Schools, the Catholic Faith is taught in religion class and nowhere else. While perhaps not intended, this approach instills a belief in the students that religion is simply another class, just like any other subject. Yet even when it is intended as just another course, religion classes are often the easy class where teachers expect very little. Sadly

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<sup>14</sup> Cardinal Pio Laghi, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. Congregation for Catholic Education. 12/28/1997. Par 18. Accessible at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_27041998\\_school2000\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html)

<sup>15</sup> Mt 18:3

<sup>16</sup> Jn 14:6



for many Catholic School children religion class has been reduced to coloring and telling their teacher how they feel. When religion class is held to lower standards than other classes, students naturally arrive at the conclusion that the Catholic faith is not as important as other subjects. If a school wants to instill the primary importance of the Catholic Faith, the teachings of the Church must be presented with the same rigor and academic expectations that are accorded to the other subjects in the curriculum.

Since God is the creator and author of everything, and Jesus Christ is Himself, the Truth, it logically follows that our faith has the power to inform all areas of study because there can be no division between faith and reason. It is thus proper for every subject area to be imbued with the central message of the Gospel, which gives students hope and a purpose in life. It is essential that students be exposed to the great wealth of the Catholic intellectual tradition which requires the faith to permeate every subject. In bringing the Catholic tradition into all the courses taught at a Catholic school, the intellectual environment is enriched because this style of cross curriculum teaching helps students to see that their faith and beliefs are not compartmentalized, but rather are a part of the whole human experience. It teaches them that “faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rise to the contemplation of the truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”<sup>17</sup>

Integrating the Catholic tradition and teachings throughout the curriculum only takes a little creativity with a teacher’s lesson plans. For example, when teaching first grade students about seed and plant development, a teacher could read the parable of “the seed and the sower”

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<sup>17</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical on Faith and Reason *Fides et Ratio*. September 14, 1998. Introduction. Accessible at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html)

from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel. A 5<sup>th</sup> grade class studying poetry could spend some time studying the poetry of one or two of the Psalms. It would also seem appropriate for a 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class, learning about the industrial revolution, to read an excerpt from Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical on rights and duties of Capital and Labor *Rerum Nevarum*. This way of thinking extends beyond the core subjects to all grades and to all subjects. A 4<sup>th</sup> grade art class could make use of the ancient masterpieces of the Tree of Jesse to learn about Jesus' lineage while also learning art appreciation, drawing, painting or other fine art skills. A Kindergarten music class could learn basic vocal techniques through simple chants of the Our Father, or other music students could be taught a song that will be sung at Sunday Mass.

One cannot love what they do not know and so if a Catholic School wishes help her students fall in love with Jesus Christ, she must ensure that her students know Jesus Christ. A school that holds its religion classes to the same standard as every other class and actively works to incorporate the rich Catholic tradition within all of its subjects establishes a firm foundation on which students can come to know and love Christ and His Church. In ensuring her entire curriculum is Catholic, a school forms her students to take up a Catholic worldview, a view that recognizes the values of Jesus Christ and sets her students on the path to being lifelong Catholics.

### **Sustained by Gospel Witness**

The greatest means of teaching is through the witness of our lives. "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."<sup>18</sup> Catholic School teachers must then first and foremost be witness of the faith.

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. December 8, 1975. IPar 41.. Accessible at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html)

They are called to be models of the beauty of the Christian message through their words and actions.

Living in a broken world, students have very few role models of the faith in their lives. Children are inundated with secular propaganda all the time, and they are searching for someone to balance the drama of secularism with the beauty of the truth. A teacher who builds a solid rapport with a student and is an effective witness of the faith, can by her example, lift a child from a lifetime of emptiness and despair into a life of fulfillment and happiness rooted in Jesus Christ.

The faculty is the most valuable resource of every Catholic School. The success of the school depends not as much on the subject matter or methodology as on the faculty who teach there. While students will forget many of the finer details of a particular class a great teacher is never forgotten and the beliefs and values of that teacher are admired by the student for a lifetime.

Children have an innate ability to recognize hypocrisy. If a teacher does not truly believe the truth of Jesus Christ that they are called to witness to, the students will recognize the inauthenticity of that witness and themselves lose sight of their purpose. To be successful, a teacher sees their work as united with the work of Christ. They must imitate Christ, the Teacher and reveal the Christian message not only through words, but more importantly through every gesture of their behavior.

The call for a teacher to teach in a Catholic School is at its core a vocation. Catholic School teachers are called by God to a life of forming the next generation of saints and they are sent by Christ through His Church as apostles who are privileged to teach and bear witness to the truth just as Jesus Christ did. The Gospel shows that people followed Jesus for what he did and only came to believe His teachings as they witnessed their beauty lived out in Jesus' life.

To live out this vocation, a teacher must constantly undergo their own personal conversion. Since one cannot give what one does not have, each teacher must themselves be fed by Christ, before they can share that message with their students. Just as Jesus retreated to spend time alone in prayer with His heavenly Father, teachers must live a sacramental life and find time for daily prayer in their busy schedules.

Each teacher must remember that their sacred ministry of education consists in being the hands, feet and mouth of Christ. “Educating is not a profession but an attitude, a way of being; in order to educate it is necessary to step out of ourselves and be among young people, to accompany them in the stages of their growth and to set ourselves beside them. Give them hope and optimism for their journey in the world. Teach them to see the beauty and goodness of creation and of man who always retains the Creator’s hallmark. But above all with your life be witnesses of what you communicate. Educators...pass on knowledge and values with their words; but their words will have an incisive effect on children and young people if they are accompanied by their witness, their consistent way of life. Without consistency it is impossible to educate!”<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Parents have the primary responsibility to educate their children. Catholic School teachers have the sacred privilege of working as co-workers with parents to raise up the next generation of saints. The whole purpose of a Catholic school is to form good citizens of this world who through God’s grace will be citizens in the life to come. Ultimately Catholic

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<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Students of the Jesuit Schools in Italy and Albania. June 7, 2013. Accessible at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130607\\_scuole-gesuiti.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html)

education is dedicated to the authentic happiness of each student, by helping them seek after the True, the Good and the Beautiful; to seek after Christ Himself.

A Catholic School must be unabashedly Catholic and upon entering into a Catholic School it should be obvious by the ethos of the school that one has come into a Catholic environment. Through focusing on the 5 core principals of a Catholic School any school can more fully live out its irreplaceable mission as a Catholic School and effect positive change in this world while preparing her students to be citizens in the life to come.